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The 2007 General Elections In Nigeria: The Implication

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Introduction

Democracy is said to be consolidated when all parties and individuals operate freely in a competitive and transparent environment; where stakeholders are guided by the rule of law, fair play and respect for group and individual rights.

In political systems that approximate the ideal of democracy, the vote and election are meaningful. Elections place some individuals in power and reject the claims of others. Elections most typically are retrospective judgments on the conduct of the person and party that has held power. Those who have given satisfaction are confirmed in the office, those who are held responsible for the poor performance of the economy are dismissed from office.

The electoral retrospective judgment is not simply an assessment of individuals but a determination of the quality of their work (Ross, K et al 1983; 20)

Generally, elections are not just the casting of votes to elect leaders, but also the active participation of the people in governance. Being a basic civic responsibility for renewing the mandate of the elected by the people, elections are pivotal to the wheel of democratic process and substances of democracy. In this sense, elections are not a ritual, organized for people to queue up every four years to cast their votes, but also a veritable process of changing leadership through peaceful means for improved socio-economic policies that benefit the people (LEMT Report 2003:1).

There is no doubt that election has been a factor in Nigeria's political development since independence. Even in pre- independence era, election played significant roles in the selection of leaders for elective post both at the national and regional level. But the fact remains that post-independence elections in Nigeria have a unique feature, especially malpractices, which has gone a long way in affecting the low level of the nature of the Nigeria's political culture (Lawal 2003: 129-130). Since independence, most of the general elections conducted so far in Nigeria, such as 1964/65 general elections, 1983 general elections and 2003 general elections have been characterized by an array of problems. Such problem manifested in 1983 general elections in both Ondo and Oyo States.

The 2007 general elections that were conducted under Olusegun Obasanjo regime were not in any way different from what we have been having in the past. The elections were marred with fraud, irregularities and all sorts of manipulations. The 2007 general elections, which some believe would consolidate democracy after eight years of democratic experience failed to usher in, the much awaited legitimized democracy. It is on this basis that this paper assesses the 2007 general elections and its implication for Democracy. The paper is divided into five sections. Section one is the introduction, while section two clarifies some relevant concepts. Section three critically assesses the 2007 general elections while section four examines the implication of the 2007 general elections for Democracy. Section five concludes.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Democracy: This may be described as a system of government under which the people exercise political power, either directly or through their representative periodically elected by themselves (Appadorai, 1975:137)

This means that a state may be described as democratic if it provides institutions for the expression of popular will on the basic question of social direction and policy.

Election: Election is defined as a device for filling an office or post through choices made by a designated body for people called the electorate (Heywood, 1997:211).

Democratic consolidation: This is a situation where electoral and transitional processes are carried out in an atmosphere devoid of violence and all forms of malpractices and irregularities.

General election: This is state wide election, usually held shortly after a primary election to fill state and national offices (Lawal, 2005:16)

THE 2007 GENERAL ELECTIONS: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Historically, elections into any office(s) are governed by rules or regulations made before the election and accepted by all the interested parties or the majority of same, especially the contestants. Aside from bringing such elections in conformity with the requirements of the law, rules and regulations when not skewed in favour of a particular interest or party credibility and genuiness on the outcome of an election, and by extension, ensures acceptance. Conventionally, rules and regulations must not only reflect national standards and aspirations but also the wishes of the people. However in the context of globalized world complete with characters, protocols, universal declaration, human rights and regulations governing national elections must of necessity meet the objective scrutiny of the international community.

In compliance with those requirements, section 153 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria created the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and assigned to its functions. INEC thus became a body corporate with perpetual succession with a mandate to make electoral laws and manage elections for the country (LEMT, Op Cit).

After all the necessary preparations by INEC, the Gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections took place on the 14th of April, 2007 across the nation, while the presidential election and election into the senate and the house of Representatives that constitute the National Assembly were held on Saturday April 21, 2007.

The turn out of voters at the Gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections was generally impressive as people trooped out in large number to vote for leaders of their choice. The voters cooperated with the officials to ensure the smooth conduct of the exercise. Security was also beefed up during the elections. However, the Presidential and National Assembly elections recorded a very low turn out of voters especially, in the South-West.

It is reasonable to note that the administration of the elections was poor as lapses were conspicuously noticeable. INEC officials and adhoc staffs were ineffective. Most of the procedures for voting were not properly adhered to. Beside this, the officials connived to perpetrate electoral fraud. Manipulations of

different kinds were recorded during and after elections, which were majorly post- election manipulations; these vary from doctoring of results between the voting centres and collation centres, outright theft of ballot boxes after and during voting, stuffing of empty ballot boxes with stolen ballot papers, Declaration of result before the arrival of ballot boxes/ papers from the polling centres, Appointment or selection of partisan electoral officials, Disqualification of candidate envisaged to be a threat to a favoured candidates as in the case of Abubakar Audu in Kogi State who was disqualified few days to election; to Intimidation, harassment of voters by thugs and military to discourage people from exercising voting rights.

The entire process was further marred by the announcement of the election result, which were at variance with people's choice. Some of these results were announced in Abuja (INEC Headquarter) while the collation was still on in the state (INEC). This act was contrary to the provision of Electoral Act of 2002 as amended in 2006. Winners were also declared in areas where INEC itself had cancelled the election result. As a result of these, people lost confidence in INEC as an electoral umpire in a democratic Nigeria. INEC suddenly became a manipulable tool in the hand of the Obasanjo-led government.

On the whole, the elections witnessed flagrant abuse of state machinery by the federal government.

There were protests by the electorate against their mandate but it seemed INEC official were taking instruction directly from the federal government as people could not stop them from their dastardly act. The overall elections therefore, could not be adjudged free and fair. As a matter of fact, the various court and tribunal cases emanating from the conduct of these elections are indications that, there are integrity, recognition and acceptance problems for the elections.

IMPLICATION OF 2007 GENERAL ELECTIONS FOR DEMOCRACY

In a democracy, the people have the power to select their rulers by voting in elections. The election process gives those who win the right to rule. The voters therefore confer legitimacy on office- holders. Democracy would be meaningless if the individual did not have the right to choose among competing candidates for positions of governmental leadership.

An individual must be free to make up his or her mind in exerting a unit of power- a vote- in determining who will be the major leaders of government. And such leaders can only obtain their public office through an open competitive selection process (Abraham and Sylvia 1980.97)

Democracy is best achieved through free and fair elections. As a matter of fact, election is an integral part of Democracy, and basically a democratic method.

However, the manipulations that bedeviled the 2007 General elections are capable of truncating democracy in Nigeria, thereby subverting the popular wishes of the people. Election in that regard, cannot guarantee a legitimized democracy capable of eliciting necessary support, acceptability and cooperation that are essential to move the nation forward.

Nwabueze (1993:78) opines that a government which by electoral malpractices keeps itself in office against the votes of the majority of the electorate lacks the legitimacy of the moral authority that popular mandate bestows. It also undermines another cardinal principle of democracy, the principle that the

welfare of the people being the object of government, victory at an election must be related and linked to ability to secure and promote the people's welfare, and that a government which has not performed well in this respect forfeits the claims to have its mandate renewed.

Rather than ability of electoral politics to guarantee the virtues of democracy and good governance, what follows elections in Nigeria are killings maiming and destruction of lives and properties resulting from electoral manipulations as in the cases of Oyo, Osun and Ekiti States in the 2007 general elections.

Election manipulation breeds apathy and cynicism among the people. They become lethargic to electoral participation. This is as a result of the fact that no matter how much the people disapproves of a government's performance and however much they desire a change, rigging can be used to subvert their wishes as expressed in their votes at an election. This was also experienced in the aforementioned states, which makes the majority of the electorate to refuse to go out and cast their votes during the presidential and National Assembly elections.

Election rigging and manipulation also affects political parties and their candidates, in the sense that rigging deprives election of its character as a competition in which all the contestants can equally aspire to win where the capacity of the contestants to rig is vastly unequal because one of them is in a position of irresistible influence over the electoral body and has power of control and direction over the organized coercive force of the country represented by the police as well as vastly greater resources of money and patronage than the other contestants have no real chance of winning. An election in these circumstances cannot be a competition in any meaningful sense of the word.

CONCLUSION

The unending court and tribunal cases coupled with crises emanating from the conduct of the 2007 general elections across the nation are clear demonstration of incompetence and insincerity on the part of INEC and the Obasanjo-led administration to conduct free and fair elections that could consolidate democracy in Nigeria.

It is reasonable to note that the process that brought Olusegun Obasanjo-led administration to power in 1999 was thwarted in April 2007 by the same government. This explains the importance of good leadership in engendering democratic stability.

Elections, rather than being instruments of achieving liberal democracy and good governance in Nigeria are often avenues of destabilization and threats to the corporate existence of Nigeria. Except, justice and rule of law are fully entrenched in the polity, the future of Nigeria's democracy will remain bleak.

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